The Sahel: a cognitive mapping
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THE SAHEL:

A COGNITIVE MAPPING

A FEATURE OF the Western 'war on terror' that seems to come out of fable rather than reality is an inability to see the enemy. In fact, it is an inability to *define* the enemy. In the Sahel, the French state has settled on 'Islamist terrorists', a sequence of adjectives that denote elusive subjects surging out of horizons of pure violence. The inability is compounded by the fact that terrorists must be picked out in terrains unknowable to the West, because the West has long considered them—still considers them—to be outside of history: Afghanistan, a redoubt against empires, those makers of history; the Sahel, a land somewhere in the continent that Hegel banished from history.

The name 'Sahel' speaks of nature rather than history. If capitalism is the driving force of modern history, students of the Sahel habitually describe it as the place where capitalism met its nemesis: intractable natural duress, and the weight of a culture so immobile that it is indistinguishable from nature and does not seem prone to melting into air. The Sahel traumatized Finn Fuglestad, a Norwegian historian who went to Niger in the late 1960s to write the history of a new African nation-state for his dissertation and came out of it convinced that Africans can never be part of the modern story of progress via *Wille zur Macht* over nature and matter. It was during these years that the terrible nature of the Sahel was brought home to bourgeois audiences in the West. One of the cyclical killer droughts of the region broke out in the early 1970s, a time when the mass media were beginning to have access to disasters in the Third World, and the Sahel entered Western chatter as a byword for drought, hunger, severe poverty and also—the contradiction does

not strike—rapid demographic growth. Since from a Western bourgeois standpoint there is no obvious agential rationality in having so many children in such depleted circumstances, Sahelian demography must be as much a blind and inexorable force of nature as Sahelian drought. Bernard Lugan, a far-right historian who is the chosen interpreter of Africa for the French Army, calls it 'suicidal'.[1]

Menace to the West?

Before insurrectionary Salafism, what unnerved the West about the Sahel was demography. At an Élysée press conference in 2004, Chirac musingly relayed his personal impressions of a tour of Mali and Niger the previous year:

> The key memories that stay with me are about the traditions of hospitality that the Africans have preserved and that I saw on the journey from the airport to the city centre. There was an immense crowd of youths who were, I would say, between five and fifteen, who were handsome, happy because something was happening, so they were chanting or dancing, they had clear warm eyes. And I was thinking, in just a few years, there will be a billion people in Africa, there will be 800 million youths . . . This is a ticking time-bomb.[2]

This response to sighting multitudes of children and teenagers on the sun-blasted streets of Sahelian towns is common among Western visitors, and the ticking time-bomb metaphor is *de rigueur* for the Western commentariat. But in 2012, with the outbreak of war in Mali, the conventional threat of the population bomb graduated into an existential threat—to the liberal West—when violent Salafism appeared to blend into it. In 2015 Serge Michailof, a leading voice in the world of development aid, published a book menacingly titled *Africanistan: Development or Jihad*. The original French subtitle—'Is a Crisis-ridden Africa Going to End up in Our Banlieues?'—points to another threat: mass migration to France and Europe, once the population bomb has exploded in a decade or two.

The Sahel of Michailof and other Western experts epitomizes the trifecta of alien demographic vitality, Islamic fanaticism and pauper migration

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[1] Bernard Lugan, Editorial, *L'Afrique réelle* 141, September 2021, p. 1.
[2] Élysée, 'Point de presse conjoint de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, et de M. Mamadou Tandja, Président du Niger, etc.', April 2004.

that is the new spectre haunting the West. A 2017 briefing note from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change stressed that 'the Sahel has the capacity to be a massive disruptive force' for the wider world.[3] Its very miseries apparently make the region a strategic menace of nearly Chinese or Russian proportions for the West, and first and foremost for Europe.[4] Unlike parts of Africa that have long been mired in immense tragedies—the Democratic Republic of Congo comes to mind—the Sahel requires urgent intervention because of its potential impact on metropolitan centres.

Act One of these interventions was Operation Serval, an emergency French military expedition that ended a jihadist advance through central Mali in the early months of 2013.[5] When the jihadists dispersed and reorganized after Serval, the expedition mutated into a much larger intervention codenamed Operation Barkhane. As announced by Hollande from the huge international military base at Niamey, Niger in July 2014, Barkhane's objectives were to block or stamp out terrorist 'safe havens' in the region and to bolster counter-terrorist efforts by the local armed forces. An initial force of 3,000 French troops, soon expanded to over 5,000, plus 200 armoured vehicles, Mirage fighter jets, helicopters and transport aircraft was deployed across a thousand-mile belt with headquarters in N'Djamena, Chad, a 1,000-strong base in Gao, Mali, special forces in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, temporary bases as needed between

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[3] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 'The Sahel: A Ticking Time Bomb', 2017.
[4] The Sahel extends from Senegal to the Sudan and includes Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria and Chad—but the international focus is on its central regions, especially the so-called 'tri-border region' between Mali, Burkina and Niger; and the Lake Chad area, where the Jihadist group popularly known as 'Boko Haram' is active. In this article, the focus will be on the tri-border region.
[5] It should be noted that Operation Serval emerged in the context of multiple international military interventions of different natures in the region, including a UN-authorized ECOWAS force known as AFISMA, led by Nigeria and Chad in January 2013; a larger UN intervention, MINUSMA, which replaced AFISMA in April 2013, and now has over 12,000 troops in the region, headquartered in Bamako (Mali), with the goal of supporting the Malian state's efforts to reclaim the half-lost provinces in its north—and later in its central region, too. The EU meanwhile has focused its energies on training Malian and Nigerien security forces to block informal migration and smuggling networks, via EUCAP, the EU Capacity Building Mission. It also runs EUTM Mali, a more recent (2020) 'boots-on-the-ground' training mission comprising a coalition of 22 European states, which seeks to gun up Mali's counter-terrorism capacities, notably through the taskforce Takuba.

Map of Sahara-Sahel, Showing 'Conflict Zone'
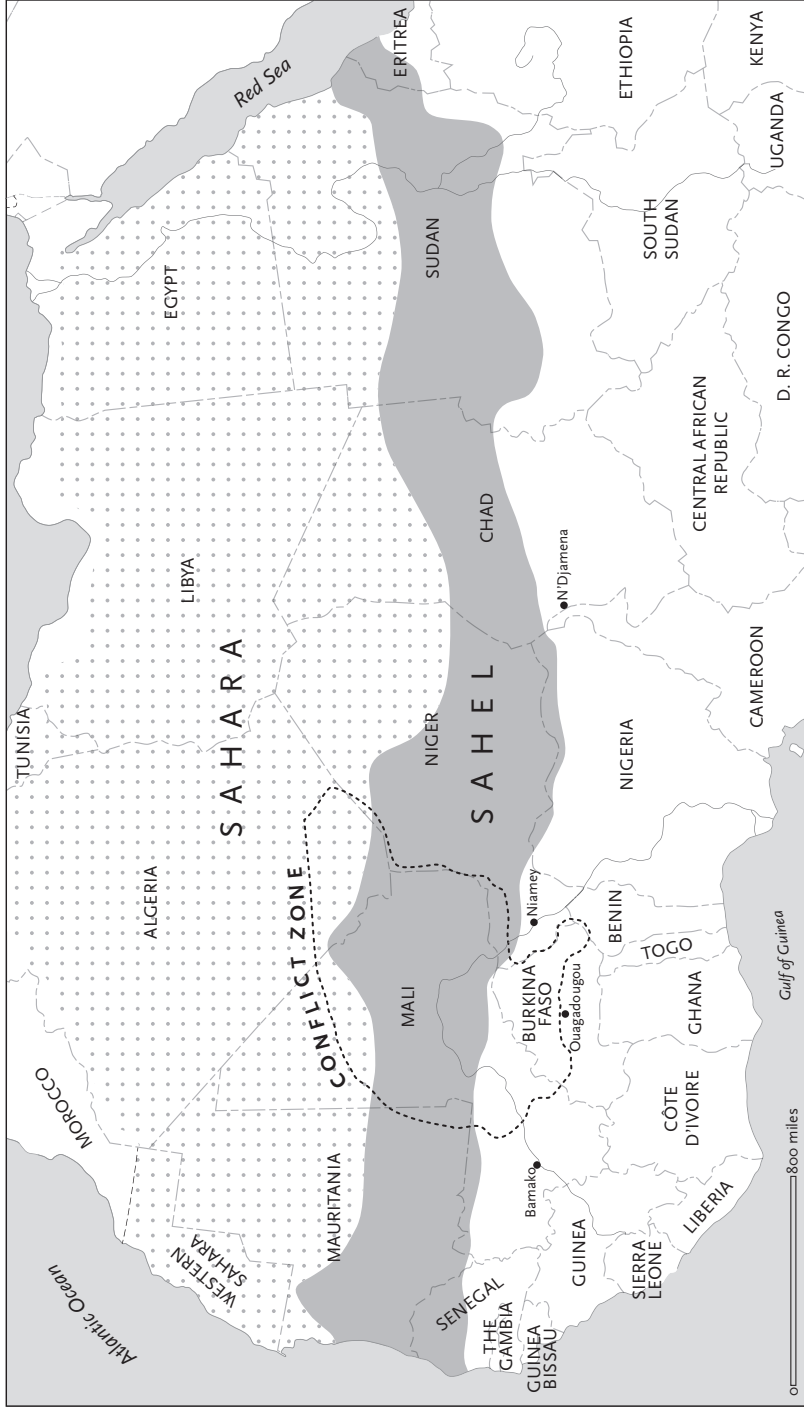
Tessalit and Timbuktu, Mali, and ongoing 'intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance' assistance, as well as armed drones since 2018, run by the Americans at Niamey. This was Act Two.

The upshot to date, however, has been increasing violence, with over 2 million displaced people in the region, fatalities estimated in the tens of thousands, ethnic clashes, popular protests and political instability. French convoys venturing out from their bases encounter lethal IEDs and attacks by suicide bombers; at least 55 soldiers have died, thirteen when two helicopters crashed into each other trying to escape from light-arms fire. Drone and air-force attacks on suspected terrorists are claimed to have driven up civilian casualties, with charges of Mirage fighter jets bombing a wedding party reminiscent of Afghanistan.[6] (Macron, with his eyes on the 2022 French presidential election, announced this year that Barkhane will end in the first quarter of 2022. It remains to be seen whether this will be just another adjustment, supplemented by the cosmetic dropping of the now stale code name.)

Amidst all this, Act Three was the deployment of multinational (mostly European) development aid, inaugurated in July 2017 by Macron under the name Sahel Alliance. It is a potluck of European solutions for the Sahel intended to heed the oft-repeated warning that military action alone cannot fix it. Incidentally, Michailof, who had advocated for just such an escalation of aid, suitable for a comprehensive uplift of the region, is unhappy with the 'methodology'. He thinks it excludes too much local Sahelian expertise, understanding and initiative.[7] But that is an inevitable corollary of the vision of the Sahel as a predicament without history to which he, like many others, reflexively subscribes.

The Western expert literature finds that the Sahel has all the plagues of Egypt, but has done little to explain their causes. In medical terms, one would say that aetiology is side-lined in favour of symptomatology, albeit unwittingly. The naiveté is not deliberate. In a mature, if declining,

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[6] See MINUSMA, 'Rapport sur l'incident de Bounty du 3 janvier 2021', March 2021. See also Emmanuel Freudenthal et al, 'Uncovering the civilian toll of France's anti-jihadist war in Mali', *The New Humanitarian*, 16 June 2021.

[7] In 2018 Michailof assembled a team of Sahelian experts at the FERDI think tank in Clermont-Ferrand, where he is a senior fellow. Led by former Burkinabe prime minister Tertius Zongo, the team is now a close partner of the Sahel Alliance.

world-system, the periphery is by definition inferior and impotent, and how that came to be is not of much significance for those who think within the parameters of the system. In the world that the West created, the Sahel is an extreme periphery, one whose very name is meant to reify it into a remote, stultifying land where only dire things happen, a bit like Siberia or the *Hic sunt leones* zones of medieval cartography. But this incarnation is modern, the result of a twentieth-century process of peripheralization which we must explore—at the very least—if we are to understand in any radical way what is happening in this corner of West Africa. Let us begin, then, before the Sahel had been dreamt of.

I. CONFINES OF ISLAM

The first Western ethnography of the region, *Relation de la Nigritie* (1689), was written when the anthropological gaze was in its infancy, or perhaps unborn. The people observed—in the Senegal Valley, near Saint-Louis—were not more exotic to the European observer, French priest Jean-Baptiste Gaby, than a European population. It was he who felt exoticized. Despite the presence of the name 'Nigritia' in the book's title, the word 'Negro' was used only twice in it and 'black' was never applied directly to the people—although Gaby noted that they called the French 'whites'. He was often admiring. He thought the Nigritian royal postal service, which combined the rapid echoing of drumbeats and horsemen scurrying around to confirm messages, far more efficient than the European and Turkish: 'A whole kingdom could be mobilized in just one night.'[8] He was startled by the Nigritian policy of what the French would later call *laïcité*, or state secularism. Interestingly, he had no word of blame for it, which in a book dedicated to a king (Louis XIV) who had just mercilessly expunged the Protestant heresy from his realms, seems a manner of approval.

Nigritia was a translation of the Arabic *Bilad as-Sudan*—literally: 'Country of the Blacks'. In Arab geography, 'Sudan' was about the people and culture, and referred to the inhabitants of the broad swathe of the continent stretching from Senegal to the Red Sea, north of the tropical forests (the nation state that bears the name Sudan today is but a fraction

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[8] Jean-Baptiste Gaby, *Relation de la Nigritie*, Paris 1689, p. 54.

of it). 'Sahel', from the Arabic *al-sahil,* means coast, shore, gateway; it is about a physical environment and function. It appeared on Arab maps whenever the situation called for it (for example, in what is redundantly called in English 'the Swahili Coast', the coast of the coastal people). The Sahel, then, was the narrow band of arid steppe immediately south of the Sahara, where Arab caravans crossing the 'sea' of the desert from the north docked in 'ports' such as Timbuktu and Biru (present-day Oualata). Beyond it lay the *terra firma* of the western Sudan—savanna lands bisected by the great loop of the Niger River—and its riches: gold, and the people who could be enslaved because they were born outside the Dar al-Islam.

Islam was present in the Sudanic region, but as a guest, not a master, and if in some places ruling figures adhered to it, they were obliged to pander to local creeds. Askia Daoud I, a sixteenth-century Songhay emperor very representative of a dynasty that came to power via the first Islamic coup d'état in West Africa, blushingly apologized to Arab visitors about the 'barbarous' court protocol he had to adhere to in his palace, as it was prescribed by Songhay religion.[9] The King was divinized, and the Northerners were taken aback when dignitaries prostrated themselves in front of him and covered their back in dust, while others rushed to present their sleeve when they saw the monarch was about to spit. (Sonni Ali, the great man of the previous dynasty and founder of the empire, styled himself Dali, the Most High, a nomenclature Muslims reserve for God.)

The social structures of the western Sudan—caste-like status groups, bound together by custom and heritage, underpinned by stout religious foundations—formed a compact obstacle to mass Islamization, through to the twentieth century. Everyone was born into one of three classes: the free, the smiths or the slaves; an agglomeration riven by contradictions, some of them strident, and which relied upon ritual belief and powerful traditions to hold it steady. For example, the free class was divided into aristocrats and citizens, whose interests often diverged, but who were bound together by clientelism and the threat of violence—by the aristocrats. The contradictions were especially sharp

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[9] Lanciné Kaba, 'The Pen, the Sword and the Crown: Islam and Revolution in Songhay Reconsidered, 1464–1493', *Journal of African History*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1984, p. 242.

Ancién Régime Sudanic Region

Source: Rahmane Idrissa, *The Politics of Islam in the Sahel*, Abingdon 2017.

in nomad societies. Among the Tuareg—Berber nomads, half-creolized by Sudanic influences—the aristocratic Imajeghen vassalized the Imrad commoners, a detail of no slim importance in the current conflagrations, as we shall see.

The Sudanic religious substructure did not reject Islam wholesale, as did Christianity, for example. It filtered and digested Islam, importing its sacred and nefarious figures into its pantheons, not unlike the ways the religions of the ancient Mediterranean treated each other's gods in the days of Zeus, Jupiter and Osiris. But if Islam did not convert whole societies in the western Sudan, it often produced an Islamic status group or community within a particular society. The Tuareg called that subgroup quite simply, Ineslemen, 'the Muslims'. Among the Fulani, another nomad society, the aristocratic Ardo'en, shocked or entertained by a religion that commended mendicity, called them Torobe, 'the Alms-Seekers'.

Foreigners and marabouts

The upshot was that the greater Sudanic system was a centre unto itself, at least until about the time Gaby wrote about it in the late seventeenth century. At that point two factors, different in kind but equally powerful, portended change: Western mercantile capitalism and Islamic radicalism. In the 1670s, about a decade before Gaby's visit, the Senegal Valley was the theatre of a war that pitched the ruling class, armed by the Senegal Company, a French enterprise that held the trading post of Saint-Louis, against the Marabouts, insurgent Muslim clerics who had mobilized the citizen class with a fervent call for ending the Atlantic slave trade. The slaving camp won, but the maraboutic movement sowed the seeds of *jihad fi sabil Allah* ('striving for the sake of God').[10]

The Marabout War, as it was called, was a turning point. The name comes from *mirabitun*, an Arabic word for the warrior clerics and

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[10] This military *jihad*—as opposed to the personal striving to become a good Muslim, known as the greater *jihad*—decisively took shape in Islamic history as a defensive response to the Crusades, which it mirrored in many respects, especially after it turned offensive. See Anne-Marie Eddé's *Saladin*, Cambridge MA 2008, and her 'Le Jihad en Orient à l'époque des croisades: guerre sainte ou idéologie politique?', in Jean Baechler, ed., *Guerre et religion*, Paris 2016.

militant hermits who guard the frontier fortresses of the Dar al-Islam. If usage in French (and English) equates a marabout to a parish priest—as did Antoine Furetière's universal dictionary, as early as 1690—their original ethos was rather that of a Knight Templar. In the Senegal Valley, the Marabouts at war saw themselves as the champions of Islam, in a country where the religion was weak and Muslims could be randomly enslaved and sold to Christians. But they also rallied people of the citizen class among the Wolof and Tukulor, a local branch of the Fulani, whether they were Muslims or not. The radicalism of their movement was as much social as it was religious. Once the movement foundered, so did its religious message among the Wolof. But it stuck with the Torobe, the Islamized subset of the Tukulor, for reasons of critical mass: they had become the majority of the citizen class in their society. That was a revolutionary fact for Islam in the western Sudan: for the first time, there was almost full overlap between the faith and the citizen mass of an important country, the Futa Toro, land of the Tukulor—even if most aristocrats stayed committed to the old ways for another century.

In the eighteenth century, the Torobe became crusaders for Islam. Sharpening their appetence for *jihad*, they disrupted the modes of accommodation that other Muslims cultivated in the region, and within decades, founded five large religious states across the western Sudan, from the Atlantic to the Adamawa Plateau: the Imamates of Futa Jalon (1727), Futa Toro (1776) and Bundu (1698), the Macina Empire (1818), also known as the Diina of Hamdallaye (the name translates as 'Religious State of Praise-to-God') and the Sokoto Caliphate (1804), as well as a swarm of transient emirates, many of them concentrated in the region now known as Liptako-Gourma—the so-called 'conflict zone'. Invariably, the Torobe *jihads* began as social revolution, fired up by Islamic theology, and roused the downtrodden masses; but, like the original model, they soon attracted all kinds of people who crowded out the true believers. During the Sokoto *jihad*, Abdullahi dan Fodio, brother and general of the *jihad* leader Usman dan Fodio, was angered to find that, in the middle of a war of emancipation, the believers were busy setting up slave markets. In the end, the old structures of domination were not revoked; instead, they received the heady prop of conservative religion, the opium of the people. Neither did the number of believers expand very greatly, not least because converting too many heathens would mean fewer slaves and smaller levies, a bad outcome for the new

aristocracy. Mass Islamization in the western Sudan would have to wait for European colonization.

Sad conquerors

Four parallel destinies tell us much about the fall of the Sudanic region to the Europeans, mainly the French. In 1900, the two great empire-builders of the region met their end. Rabih Zubayr, conqueror of Borno, his capital at Dikwa, was decapitated by the French after a battle on the banks of Lake Chad in April that year. Samori Touré, head of the Wassoulou Empire, capitaled at Bissandugu (and great-grandfather of Guinea's first president, Ahmed Sékou Touré), had been captured by the French two years earlier and died in June 1900, of pneumonia and depression. The ends of Muhammadu Attahiru Mai Wurno, the last Sokoto Caliph, and of Babatu, founder of what was shaping up to be a new Songhay Empire in the Volta regions, were more dramatic. For Mai Wurno, the victory of the British over Sokoto in 1903 was literally a sign of the apocalypse. He vacated a land fallen to the power of miscreants, and started a *hijra*, a flight in the style of the Prophet, to Mecca where, in this end of times, the Mahdi was surely about to arrive and offer Muslims his triumphant leadership.[11] The final battle was at hand. Followed by throngs of *muhajirun* ('those doing the hijra'), he struck out east on the paths known to lead to Arabia, traversing the Nile region. Passing through there, he was stunned to find that the barbarians he had left behind in his country had seized that land too, which they had baptized the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. For their part, the British saw the arrival of the crowds of able-bodied men and women from the west as a providential solution to the shortage of labour in the Blue Nile districts. The wearied Mai Wurno turned from fleeing caliph into head of a migrant labour force and agreed to put his people at their service.

Babatu was the last surviving man in a trio of gallant Songhay-Zarma *wongaari*—a mix of heroic protectors and mercenary swords—who had spent many years fighting the Fulani in the Liptako-Gourma in the 1860s and 1870s. The three men afterward wound up in the Volta regions, where a local potentate had sought their services. Instead of

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[11] The Mahdi: Islam's eschatological messiah, who will appear at the end of times, alongside Isa (Jesus) to prepare for the coming of the Divine Kingdom.

fighting for him, they took over the country and laid the foundations of a large state which an admiring Hausa chronicler called the Asilin Zaberma, 'the Zarma Line'. Babatu, incidentally, had crossed paths with Samori, who proposed an alliance against the incoming Europeans, but was turned down. Babatu was then attacked by the British, who saw him as an intruder in the 'Northern Provinces' of their expanding Gold Coast colony. Chased by them, he tried guerrilla warfare before absconding east and bumping into the Germans, who were busy setting up their Togoland colony. Eventually, the Germans offered him the chiefship of Yendi in Togoland, and the empire-builder settled down as a farmer of yam, millet, and rice—essentially, an agricultural migrant. There was no escaping the world the Europeans were busy creating, and Mai Wurno and Babatu were forced into the role that they assigned to the western Sudan: that of labour reservoir for possessions with a richer soil.

The interior of the Sudanic region, today the landlocked countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, inspired profound pessimism in its conquerors. 'Although this dry and arid region can maintain a scattered population, it will never provide any riches', wrote a deflated French soldier, Colonel Noël, in the diary he kept in eastern Niger. 'What strikes one most is the stillness which reigns, the country seems static and empty. Confronted with this dying countryside, one is invaded by the painful sentiment of death rather than of life.'[12] Peanuts and cotton earned some export income in localized regions of the colonies of Niger and Upper Volta (Burkina), but nothing that could guarantee balanced budgets, let alone surplus. Since colonies must pay for their upkeep, the Sudanic territories could afford only a barebones administration, good for tax collection, some civil-service routines, the running of a police force and a justice system of sorts, but completely incapable of carrying out transformative tasks at structural levels.

2. PATHS TO PERIPHERALIZATION

From the start, the Sudanic region had what modern political science calls a 'weak state'. It was also a predatory one. 'In the absence of concessions and plantations, the plunder of men and products became the exclusive task of the colonial political power', noted Olivier de Sardan,

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[12] In Yehoshua Rash, *Les premières années françaises au Damergou: des colonisateurs sans enthousiasme*, Paris 1973, p. 301.

who called this 'despotic exploitation'.[13] The parallels with a feudal order were numerous, including a cascading system of suzerainty from the colonial *commandant* to the petty village chief, combines of chiefs and clerics as executants of customary governance, *droit du seigneur* exercised by colonial rulers, provision of security against Saharan marauders as justification for exploitation and medieval punishments, which in some cases inspired their targets to carnivalesque religious response. (In western Niger, the French took action against a village priestess, Chibo, who presided over the Hauka cult, which featured *grand guignol* renditions of the colonial military, led by the terrifying and burlesque genie Kumandan Muugu, the 'Evil Commandant'). This feudal-style abuse was the bitter fruit of the colonies' poverty, and lives on today as the dark side of the political culture of the Sahel states.

The colonial rationale for the peripheralization of the South was squarely set forth by Jules Harmand, a retired French colonial proconsul, in a sharp-tongued monograph, *Domination et colonisation*, published in 1910. Unlike settler colonies, which are colonies proper and eventually develop their own government and go their own way—in essence becoming their own centre—exploitation colonies should properly be called 'dominations', because their government is always—'giving to the adverb the highly relative sense it has in politics', Harmand prudently added—separate from the governed, ordered and arranged (*préposé*) from the metropole.[14] Decisions about them are made according to the dictates of metropolitan politics and the rest is only management of the friction caused by the transfer of those decisions, a task performed by career administrators with the wherewithal of a police state to hand. What Harmand called 'domination' is government of the periphery, which presupposes that the dominated cannot be treated as political subjects—in this context, because they are an object, almost an inert material, the 'backward races' that need to be transformed into a 'useful population' for the sake of commerce and civilization.

Independence did not fundamentally change this setup, especially in extreme peripheries such as the Sudanic region. In theory, former colonies could determine their own governments, once free from domination. But the imperative of transforming 'backward' people—the term

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[13] Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Les Sociétés Songhay-zarma (Niger-Mali): chefs, guerriers, esclaves, paysans*, Paris 1984, p. 159.
[14] Jules Harmand, *Domination et colonisation*, Paris 1910, p. 176.

remains popular in official circles in ex-tropical colonies—into 'evolved' ones stuck, though now for the sake of nation-building and develop-ment.[15] Gregory Mann has shown that if the new Sahelian states laid the groundwork of government, much of its substance was from the start procured by bilateral cooperation or with NGOs franchized by the international-aid regime.[16] This 'non-governmentality', as Mann calls government by means of the aid industry, then expanded through the arc of the decline of the state, from the growth and ambition of post-liberation, through the drama of drought and debt in the 1970s and 1980s, to the doldrums of neoliberal democracy since the 1990s. It was in the middle sequence, when even a Promethean revolutionary like Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso could not beat deepening peripheraliz-ation, that the western Sudan finally became today's Sahel. Widening as the state wilted, non-governmentality supplied depoliticized palliatives to pathologies that are systemic to the centre–periphery relationship. Non-political government is thus a consequence of the colonial periph-eralization of the South.

Colonialism had meanwhile spurred the market economy, urbanization and a degree of formal school education, forces which scrambled the traditional substructure of society and collapsed the ritual obstacles to Islamization. In 1900, Islam was still a minority religion in the west-ern Sudanic region. By the end of the century, all the countries of the Sahel were majority Muslim, with rates of over 90 per cent of the popu-lation in most of them. Improvements in public health and, perhaps even more, the quelling of conflict and revolt—a task at which the colo-nial regime excelled—changed the demographic patterns in the region, where population had been stagnant or declining since at least the fall of the Songhay Empire. People began to live longer. Today, at an average of sixty years, life expectancy in the region is double what it was in 1960. This means, inter alia, that as they struggle to eke out a living in an indi-gent economy, people have more time to make more children, the only guarantee that most can have of social safety and old-age care. Most of them live off the land, where they practice widespread, labour-intensive

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[15] In the French domain, the term *évolué* was used for natives who graduated from their backward culture into the modern culture brought by the West. The Hausa-language equivalent for this, *ci-gaaba*, 'moving forward', stresses the opposition to backwardness even more.

[16] Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel*, Cambridge 2014.

farming—yet another reason for having many children—that is an inexorable menace, worse than drought or an epizootic disease, to transhumant herders, especially since most of the population growth is a farming population growth.

The farmer-herder relationship has become increasingly dangerous, combining the social violence of the destruction of the herders' livelihood by farming colonization and enclosure of the savanna with the physical violence of seasonal fights, sometimes high in casualties, across the agro-pastoral arc of the region. These moments of bloodletting are symptoms of a fever that needs political answers, but—in what is an effect of the region's peripheralization—government in the Sahel is not political. In this period, and not just in the Sahel, NGOization neutered the 'Third World', with its intimation of revolt against an iniquitous international society, into the meeker 'Global South', while 'empowerment' came to depict routines for getting the generic poor to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They might not become a 'useful population', but they would be less of a burden for impotent states. In this scheme of things, the strident problems in the Sahel's countryside were diced into project-manageable humanitarian or 'development' issues and arranged in a smorgasbord of distress from which governments in the centres of the world could 'pick their poison', to use a simile from Gregory Mann. And then there is the external aspect. In becoming 'the Sahel', the Sudanic region did not only lose its political orientation to the West, it also lost its cultural orientation to Sunni metropoles in the Arab world, and turned into a double periphery—a fitting ground for conflict between the two outside centres. The external (Western–North African) origins of the 2012 Mali War would be a case in point.

Domestic determinants

What did the region look like on the ground at the time this war began? We will focus here on Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the three states at the heart of the 'conflict zone'. All three countries have their population and administrative centres in their southern regions, and their northern zones are their peripheries. For the more northerly Niger, which lies almost entirely in a Sahelian environment, the north is the Sahara, known there as the Ténéré. For Mali, in a more middling location, the peripheral north includes the Sahel—the thin 'centre' of Mali around Mopti is part of this—as well as a good chunk of the Sahara. For the more

southerly Burkina, the north is the Sahel. These south–north divides are the result of habitability. The southern regions, better watered, more cultivable and closer to the economic metropoles of West Africa—southern Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire—ringing the Gulf of Guinea, are where most people live and most activity is concentrated. This reality leaves the north objectively marginalized.

When the three states democratized in the 1990s, in the sense of shifting to parliamentary electoralism, the political classes born from the process tended to reflect their internal geopolitics. This can be gauged from presidential figures. In Niger, the two longest tenures of the democratic era are those of two Sahelo-Saharan men: Mamadou Tandja, from a minority ethnicity of the Diffa region, in the country's semi-arid far east; and Mahamadou Issoufou, an Ader Hausa from the northerly area where Hausaland transitions into Tuareg country. Bazoum Mohamed, the current president, and an Arab from a semi-desert locale in north-eastern Niger, is in this sense true to form. Mali has tended to elect men from the south, even if rivals from the north can be plausible challengers and prominent northern politicians staff the higher reaches of the state. But Amadou Toumani Touré, the man in power when the Mali War started in 2012, owed his position to prestige derived from events in the early 1990s rather than to ethno-regional origins.[17] He was an immediate casualty of the war, as will be seen below. In Burkina, presidents have always hailed from what local commentators euphemistically call 'the central Plateau', i.e., the Mossi country (the Mossi, a Sudanic group, are a plurality of Burkina's population), but political rivalry, dating from the colonial era, is with 'the west'—the geopolitical region centred on the city of Bobo-Dioulasso—not with the north. In 2012, Burkina was still ruled by Blaise Compaoré, the man who brutally unseated his friend Thomas Sankara in 1987 and later managed to manipulate democratic politics into steadying his grip on power for nearly three decades. In events unconnected with the Sahel conflicts, Compaoré was dethroned by a civilian insurgency in 2014.

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[17] During the pro-democracy civilian insurgency of 1991 that ended authoritarian rule in Mali, Toumani Touré was the military officer who arrested long-reigning President Moussa Traoré and then presided over a constitutional transition at the end of which he abstained from seeking power. These actions gave him an aura which he exploited for a presidential candidacy with no political party ten years later.

But the most important implication of these internal configurations for this story is not necessarily who governs, but rather with what one does the governing: concretely, it is the question of 'the spread of the state'. In all three countries, the distribution of state services—including security—is uneven, highly concentrated in the capital and major towns, and more present in central than in peripheral regions. State staff overwhelmingly come from sedentary communities, not just because they are the majority, but also because formal school education is a prerequisite for civil-service careers and is easier to implement among the settled than among nomads or semi-nomads. One result of this is a kind of psychological distance between certain communities, or districts, and the state—including the state's security sector. Such details explain why in Mali and Burkina Faso (though not in Niger) the state was easily dislodged from the northerly fringes which the *jihadis* first attacked. But if geography or geopolitics is decisive, it is not determinant. This is perhaps most visible in the case of Niger, where the troubles, though serious, remain localized in border areas—including the southern border with Nigeria: the Boko Haram crisis, which lies beyond the scope of this essay—despite the fact that the peripheral north is vaster and no better integrated with the central regions than in the other countries.[18]

All three states therefore faced the *jihadi* challenge with small, long-neglected armed forces, which hovered in numbers just above 10,000 troops. This was at the lower end of the Sub-Saharan average, which contrasts with North Africa—a region where armies typically number in the hundreds of thousands, reserve forces and paramilitaries included. Since 2012, the Sahel states have stepped up military recruitment, with the highly organized French and EU assistance detailed above. Niger's army, for example, grew from 12,000 men that year to 25,000 in 2020 and the plan is to double its strength by 2025. Burkina has similar objectives, even if it moves at a much slower pace. Given the urgent and expensive requirements of training, equipping and refurbishing, these efforts are akin to building a firefighting force in the middle of

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[18] At the time of writing, road communications with Niger's northern capital Agadez are nearly impracticable, making it very hard, for example, for citrus fruits producers—a major economic sector in the north—to maintain their profitable connection with markets in the south. For considerations on 'Boko Haram', see Idrissa, *The Politics of Islam in the Sahel: Between Persuasion and Violence*, Abingdon 2017, Chapter Six: 'Nigeria: Breakdowns'.

an inferno. But only Mali's military melted in that fire, because it was caught in the opening conflagration, while the French 'shield' gave the other two countries time to get a grip on themselves.

3. VIEW FROM PARIS

Since conceding its African colonies independence in 1960, France has intervened militarily on average once every fifteen months for the past sixty years.[19] That is not counting secret and covert operations, sometimes using mercenary force or colluding with an axis of 'deplorables'—Pretoria, Abidjan, Rabat. This was in part a consequence of de Gaulle's concept of French sovereignty, which depended on France remaining a world power, even *sans* territorial empire. De Gaulle expressed this in terms of 'grandeur', a rejection of the fate of an upmarket periphery within the core of the US-centred West. Despite the fact that this was exactly the position to which the realities of the post-war global order consigned France—the not-so-abject station of a 'middle power'—de Gaulle baked this sense of grandeur into the structures of the Fifth Republic, and more concretely, into its presidency. Foreign policy, the field of grandeur *par excellence*, is the 'reserved domain' of the President, who is free to make decisions there without much control from 'the political parties' (de Gaulle thoroughly despised them) at the National Assembly. And if metropolitan sovereignty fed resistance to, or at least defiance of, American (and Soviet) dominance, it also required a parallel subordination of the only world region where a post-imperial middle-sized European nation could still play at being a great power, Sub-Saharan Africa.

The recessions and loss of steam of the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of European integration, revealed that even in Africa, France was punching above its weight. The year 1994, in particular, was the *annus horribilis* for French power on the

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[19] The archetype of the Françafrique-style intervention was set in Gabon in 1964, when French soldiers restored to power the hyper-Francophile President Léon Mba—he wished Gabon could be an Overseas Territory, like the Antilles, and proposed insertion of the French tricolour in the canton of his country's independence flag—after his deposition by the mildest-mannered coup-makers, who had taken care that not a drop of blood was shed.

continent. The CFA franc, a currency central to France's relationship with its former Sub-Saharan colonies, was devalued that year by half under pressure from the IMF—an act which, to the Africans, was an unforgivable betrayal on the part of their patron. The revulsion at the 'colonial currency' that is today a strong streak of Francophone sovereigntism in Africa dates from then. The same year, Rwanda exploded in the hand of a French state that was playing the sorcerer's apprentice with the intense feelings of socio-'ethnic' hatred that coursed through that country's body politic. The web of meddling in Rwanda was woven in cramped offices under the roofs of the Élysée Palace, with no consultation with parliament at any point. It reflected in part the idiosyncrasies of Mitterrand himself, who had been a Cabinet Minister in the days when France still had its African colonies.[20]

The revealing point here is that French interest in Rwanda, a former colony of Belgium, began as part of the democracy promotion that was *de rigueur* in the West after the end of the Cold War, but segued into a bloody colonialist drama once Mitterrand became convinced that the Tutsi rebels attacking his personal friend President Juvénal Habyarimana were a tool of 'the Anglo-Saxons' who were trying to pull a 'Fashoda' (from the Kitchener-Marchand encounter of 1898 which lives on in some French memories as a major humiliation). The French presidency and its prime instrument of 'African policy', the Army, appeared far from decolonized. The question that the Rwanda debacle posed was just how inextricably the colonialist hangover, the sense of grandeur and French intervention in Africa were interlaced.[21] The 1991 Gulf War had already revealed the threadbare character of Gaullist military independence after America's Reagan-era upgrade in weapons technology. In 1996, Chirac initiated a new defence strategy, cutting back French troops in Africa—which

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[20] In 2021, 'La France, le Rwanda et le genocide des Tutsi (1990–1994)', the 1,200-page report of an official fact-finding commission led by the historian Vincent Duclert, called Mitterrand's Rwanda policy 'a defeat of the mind' (*défaite de la pensée*) and 'an intellectual crash'—an exceedingly harsh assessment in France—pointing to the profound confusion in which the French state had fallen apropos a continent it thought it knew very well.

[21] In an official photograph for his presidency shot in June 2017, Macron stands with hands braced on a desk on which de Gaulle's *War Memoirs* lie open. 'I am alright with the grandeur discourse,' he told the weekly *Le Point* two months later. In spring 2021 Macron travelled to Rwanda to ask for 'forgiveness'—though without offering an apology.

would henceforth be more 'flexible' and 'efficient', doing more to train local armies—while also pledging to rejoin NATO's integrated command structure and beef up EU military muscle. Henceforth, multilateralism would be the order of the day.[22]

Desert turmoil

The 1990s saw deterioration on other fronts. First, the Tuareg rebellion, which erupted in 1990 with an attack on government facilities in the northern Mali town of Gao, fostered a dangerous situation in a swathe of the Sahel, principally around the Mali–Niger border. The rebels for the most part were members of the higher subset of Tuareg society, the Imajeghen nobility—a minority who felt they had most to lose from the levelling integration of the Tuareg into the national societies of Niger and Mali.[23] Members of the Imrad middle category tended to side with the state; and the majority subset, the Ikelan, slave descendants of black skin, were adversaries of the Imajeghen. Aside from this social conflict, the Imrad were economic rivals of the local Fulani herders, who were caught in a pincer movement between their pastoralist competitors in the north and encroaching farming colonization from the south—across the border in Niger. What the Western media were fond of imagining as a revolt of freedom-loving, oppressed desert warriors—brave yet downtrodden—against brutal African states was, on the ground, a civil war over age-old social contradictions and livelihood crises, in which the state was often a marginal player.[24] In the 1990s, by escalating the seasonal fights which the state could 'manage'—though not avert—into

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[22] The French Ambassador to Washington could nevertheless inform his audience at the US National War College in February 2000 that the Mediterranean–Africa–Middle East region was France's 'backyard', of vital strategic interest: Degan Sun and Yahia Zoubir, 'Sentry Boxes in the Backyard: Analysis of French Military Bases in Africa', *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2011, p. 87.

[23] The levelling of Tuareg society—still quite incomplete—is an outcome of institutions and processes such as modern schools and markets, formal jobs and the growth of the informal economy, which all have had the tendency to break up traditional hierarchies since the colonial era—particularly by offering opportunities to the subaltern. This has happened to all the Sudanic region's traditional societies, not just the Tuareg—but in the latter's case the shock was supplemented by the fact that the new states were controlled by populations which the Tuareg nobility (though not all Tuareg) used to consider with contempt as a slave reservoir.

[24] For a recent analysis of the situation in Mali in particular, see Nicolas Normand, 'Le Sahel peut-il retrouver la paix?', in *Commentaire*, no. 164, Winter 2018–19, pp. 839–46.

a war, the 'Tuareg rebellions' militarized the culture in the cross-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, including through the spread of firearms not-so-secretly supplied by the Nigerien or Malian army to anti-rebel militias.
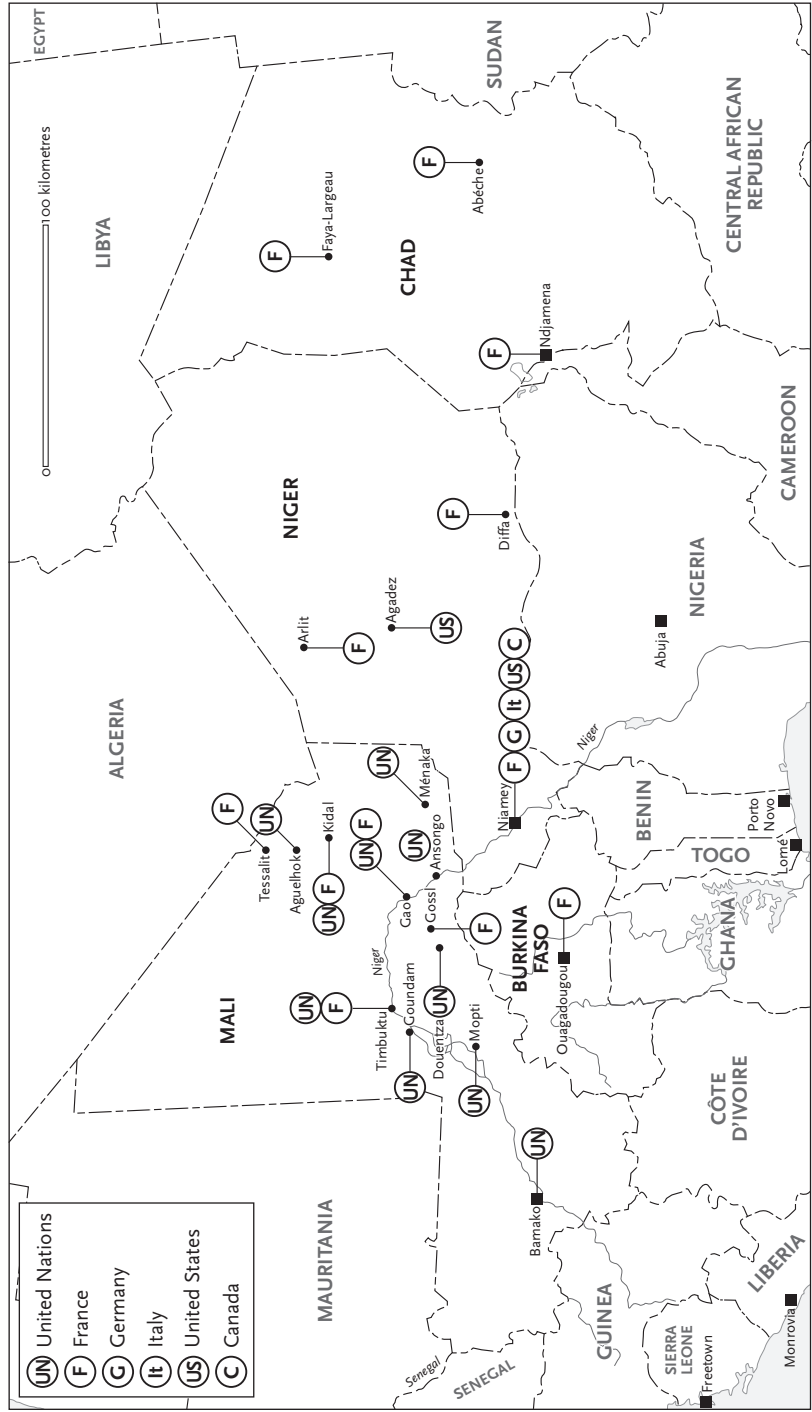
Second, during the 1990s Algeria was in the throes of its great national tragedy, a decade-long civil war that left upwards of 150,000 dead, mostly civilians who got their throats slit in grisly episodes of mass killing at the hand of Salafi combatants, when they were not killed by the Army or other state-security operatives. By 2000, the military—which, in Algeria, *is* the state—had won the war, albeit precariously. Remnants of its Salafi adversary fled south to the Sahel and eventually settled in northern Mali. As noted above, the Malian state was a southern entity disconnected from the north, which from the vantage point of Bamako, the capital, appeared a sparsely populated frontier-land. Mali's military, debilitated by massive corruption among the higher-ups, had all but vacated that part of the country, especially after agreements with the Tuareg rebels in the mid-1990s had obliged the Army to reduce its presence there.

The Algerian Salafi exiles were left free to make a sanctuary of the area, prospering in the early 2000s through an industry of abduction (of Westerners) and ransom, and stakes in illicit or unofficial trade with Algeria. From the viewpoint of the Malian state—and very likely of Algeria as well—things could be left thus indefinitely, especially since northern lawlessness provided a haven for drug trafficking, from which many a bigwig in Bamako richly lined his pockets. The Algerian militants were not after the Malian state and kept their eyes trained on their own country. The only disgruntled actors were the French. Abductions often plucked French citizens from the Sahel and at times targeted France's mining operations (uranium) in northern Niger. But Bamako suavely ignored their proposals for action against 'the terrorists' in the desert.

A pillar falls

The trigger for the war in Mali—which, detonating the incendiary combination of Tuareg unrest, militarized conflict in the tri-border region and violent *jihadism* exported from the Algerian civil war, swiftly expanded into the complex of violence now called 'the Sahel War', sucking in the 12,000-strong MINUSMA force as well as the Serval and Barkhane operations—was another external intervention, causing turmoil in Algeria's

Location of Foreign Forces

Legend:
- (UN) United Nations
- (F) France
- (G) Germany
- (It) Italy
- (US) United States
- (C) Canada

Scale: 100 kilometres

Countries and places labeled: EGYPT, LIBYA, SUDAN, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, CHAD, NIGER, ALGERIA, MALI, MAURITANIA, CAMEROON, NIGERIA, BENIN, BURKINA FASO, TOGO, GHANA, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, SENEGAL, GUINEA, SIERRA LEONE, LIBERIA

Faya-Largeau, Abéché, Ndjamena, Diffa, Arlit, Agadez, Niamey, Abuja, Porto Novo, Lomé, Ouagadougou, Tessalit, Aguelhok, Kidal, Ménaka, Ansongo, Gao, Gossi, Timbuktu, Goundam, Douentza, Mopti, Bamako, Monrovia, Freetown

Rivers: Niger, Senegal

powerful eastern neighbour, Libya. The US-supported Franco-British NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 was presented as the polar opposite of what had happened in Rwanda. With Libya's beleaguered leader Gadhafi supposedly on the verge of committing a carnage, it followed from the Western doctrine of a 'duty to protect', which was a response to the failure to save the Tutsis in 1994. But as Hillary Clinton's glee at the slaughter of Gadhafi suggests—'We came, we saw, he died'—the real goal was perhaps simply to finally get rid of a man who had been getting under the skin of Western leaders for decades.

Yet Gadhafi was a regional pillar of the Western order. He prevented Sub-Saharan migrants from crossing the Mediterranean by offering them jobs—not by putting them in slave camps as do current 'authorities' in the country; he was an active enemy of Salafism and, as the only counterweight to the Gulf money flowing to the Salafi cause in the Sahel, he financed Sufism in the region and celebrated Mawlid—the 'Muslim Christmas' and a major Sufi festival—in Timbuktu and Agadez (Timbuktu's sister city in northern Niger). He consolidated peace in northern Mali and Niger by offering plum jobs in Tripoli to the Tuareg rebels who had been on an insurgency high since the early 1990s—a mood fanned from France by an efficient pro-Tuareg lobby rooted in the Socialist Party, with Danielle Mitterrand and Bernard Kouchner as leading voices—and the Army.[25]

When Gadhafi fell in October 2011, Nigerien and Malian Tuareg returned home, and the latter quickly started an insurgency from bases in the region of Kidal, in north-eastern Mali. That was lighting a match in a gunpowder depot. (Niger had somehow managed to prevent its own returnees from doing the same, but had the Malian rebellion succeeded, all bets were that they would have joined in). The aim was to turn Kidal Region, a patch of desert five times the size of Belgium but with a population of about 70,000, into the independent country 'Azawad', the Tuareg name of a fossil tributary of the Niger River that traverses the area from east to west. To give more substance to this prospective country, Gao and Timbuktu—which both have majority Songhay populations—were to be part of Azawad. But the Tuareg secessionists soon discovered that the Salafi militants were now the true power in Mali's north, and their supremacy only grew when a major Tuareg rebel chief,

[25] See Dominique Casajus, 'Les amis français de la "cause touarègue"', in *Cahiers d'études africaines*, no. 137, 1995, pp. 237–50.

Iyad ag-Ghaly—a key leader in the 1990s violence—embraced *jihad*. In 2007, then-President Toumani Touré appointed ag-Ghaly to a prize position at Mali's consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as a way to keep the hot-headed leader at some remove from national politics. But he was expelled three years later when Saudi authorities became alarmed about his connections with Al-Qaeda operatives. Thus, he returned to Mali just in time for the upcoming commotion.

Advance on Bamako

In early 2012, a combine of *jihadis* and secessionists led a surprise attack on Aguel'hoc, a desert town where Mali kept a sleepy military base. Over a hundred people, most of them soldiers, were rounded up and had their throats slit, a mode of killing that revealed to the world that the Salafi were at the vanguard of the fight. In April they erupted onto Western TV screens with the news that they had taken Gao and Timbuktu. Eventually, the *jihadis*, who were by the end of the year Malians in their majority, evicted the secessionists. Their agenda was no longer to set up an ethnocracy in the north but a theocracy in Mali, and the national state became the target. Moving briskly, the *jihadis*, now in control of the north, launched a set of military and diplomatic manoeuvres—the latter via the Burkina Faso government—intended to force Mali to change the nature of its state and jettison *laïcité*.

Meanwhile, under the heat of the northern disaster, events in Bamako had devolved into a political drama verging on the grotesque. In March 2012, a junior Army officer and English teacher toppled Touré's government, but 'the international community'—mainly the two West African regional groupings, ECOWAS and WAEMU[26]—rapidly strong-armed him into installing an interim civilian administration. The latter turned out to be so impotent that its head was mobbed and injured in his office and had to spend his first months 'in power' recovering in a Parisian hospital. In January 2013, the northern *jihadis*, an assortment of North African militants, Tuareg and Arab brigades and Fulani foot soldiers—with a smattering of enthusiasts from neighbouring West African countries—moved

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[26] ECOWAS, which includes all West African countries minus Mauritania, could cut off Mali's access to international trade; and the West African Economic and Monetary Union, which includes all West African users of the CFA franc, crucially had the power to turn off the spigot of central-bank payments to Mali's banking system.

south, engaging the Malian Army in the country's central districts. The *jihadis'* actions in occupied Timbuktu—destruction of cultural heritage, beheadings, penal maiming and flogging—had already evoked parallels with the Taliban, and their trek south onboard pick-up trucks immediately conjured images of the 1996 fall of Kabul. Sceptics, such as the Sahel scholar Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, refused the analogy, pointing out that southern Mali was not the hospitable terrain to *jihadis*—perceived there mainly as a horde of light-skinned northerners—that a warlord-tormented Afghanistan was to the Taliban.[27]

Whether Bamako was in real danger or not, the French had been itching even before the conflict to destroy Mali's 'terrorist nest'. If left to fester, they were convinced it would end up destabilizing the entire West African region. The invasion of the central districts, seemingly threatening Bamako, was thus an unmissable opportunity for a surgical intervention. Serval, as the operation was codenamed, was a diplomatic and logistical success. It was strictly legalistic, not only securing a blank cheque from the UN, as had NATO's Libyan adventure, but also from the African Union, which had been divided over Libya, and was officially triggered by a request from the head of Mali's interim government, the hobbled Dioncounda Traoré. It was also a typical French intervention, organized on a shoestring compared to the resources deployed in American interventions, but relying on the unmatched logistical network that France still possessed on the continent, the central node of which is in Gabon. And it was—apparently—able to defeat the *jihadis* and liberate the emblematic town of Timbuktu within the six months that French law permits a military operation to last before the Élysée is obliged to put it to the National Assembly. Many military officers privately opine that things should have ended then. But they didn't. Serval was followed by Barkhane, and the waters became murky.

Serval had dispersed the *jihadis*, not beaten them. Barkhane was supposed to accomplish that, opening a new front in the West's 'war on terror', not merely a salvaging of the Malian state. In fact, far from helping Mali rebuild authority, Barkhane further damaged it. Enamoured with 'the Tuareg'—whom the French international press, RFI and France 24 consistently presented as 'secular independentists' with a just cause—France sought them as allies against 'Islamist terrorists'. The

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[27] Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue: la France au Sahel*, Paris 2020.

rebels that other Malians see, with some justification, as the prime instigators of the country's breakdown, were reinstalled in Kidal, and the Malian state authorities were kept at bay. Apart from Christian Rouyer, the then French ambassador in Bamako, who was sent back home for disagreeing with this approach, the French chose to believe that the Malians' outrage at this de facto partition of their country was mere ethnic hatred—of southern 'blacks' against the Tuareg. (Another former French ambassador in Mali, Nicolas Normand, publicly accused France of 'giving Kidal to the separatists'). The accepted view was that if the Malian army returned to the north, they would perpetrate a genocide;[28] and at any rate, the Tuareg, 'masters of the country', were thought to be better auxiliaries in the fight against the terrorists in the desert than 'southern blacks'.

The assessment is a figment of the French Army's colonial baggage. The established educator of the French military on African issues is the aforementioned historian Bernard Lugan, professor at the École de Guerre and Saint-Cyr-Coëtquidan, the premier military schools of France. Lugan is a pro-Hutu specialist of Rwanda, revisionist on the Rwandan genocide and a far-right intellectual who resents *répentance*, the rightist pejorative for signs of contrition about colonialism. His online magazine *L'Afrique réelle* ('Real Africa')—widely read by officers involved in interventions on the continent—roundly dismisses as insufferable *répentance* the Duclert report on French responsibilities in the Rwandan genocide. 'Real Africa' for Lugan is a land of feuding ethnicities, squabbling tribes and hostile races. Democratization, far from being a solution, only adds fuel to the fire. 'In politics', he wrote in the editorial for the January 2021 issue, '2020 was a year of elections [in Africa] which have, in nearly all cases, confirmed ethno-demographic relations, the ethnicities with the most people winning mathematically against those with less people.' The 'observation' could hardly explain why Niger elected an Arab president, a man from what is, at less than 2 per cent of the population, the smallest minority in the country. The Sahel Wars, Lugan has explained in another number of *L'Afrique réelle*, are 'ethnic jihadism' not 'universalist

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[28] Following a routine first honed against the Nigerian military in the Biafra War—where France supported the Biafran rebels—the French media, and a Western chorus of human-rights defenders, were exhaustive in reports of exactions by the Malian army, especially against the *peaux claires* ('light skins'). See also Mamoudou Djibo's coverage of the same issues during the 1990s rebellion in 'Rébellion touarègue et question saharienne au Niger', in *Autrepart*, no. 23, 2012, pp. 135–56.

jihadism,' the latter occurring only in the centres of the Islamic world. Lugan's offerings would be reasonably advanced had they been written around 1850. Today, they are make-believe—useful only in sustaining the belief in French military circles that interventions in Africa follow the metropolitan-colonial practice of quelling turmoil on the periphery, in the name of civilization or Western values. They are the sort of history that practice needs.

4. CONVERGING CRISES

The Sahel Wars are rooted in other histories. Since their beginnings in the early 2010s, they have not expanded beyond a zone that covers northern and central Mali, northern and eastern Burkina Faso and the northern corners of western Niger. Not only did they not cross into neighbouring countries—in spite of sporadic attacks in northern Benin and Côte d'Ivoire—they have not even, thus far, propagated into other provinces of the three countries in which they are transpiring. The conflict zone corresponds almost exactly to the territory of the Songhay Empire, an expansion of the Kingdom of Gao that filled the security vacuum left in the Middle Niger by the precipitous decline of the Mali Empire at the turn of the fifteenth century. The great disruptors of trade in the region, the Mossi potentates of Yatenga (now in northern Burkina) and the warrior classes of the Tuareg and Fulani, were respectively contained, vassalized and massacred by King Sonni Ali in the course of a thirty-year military campaign in the late fifteenth century.

But in 1591, a century after Sonni Ali's death, the Songhay Empire was destroyed by a daring invasion engineered by Morocco's Sultan, Ahmad al-Mansur, who had a vision of the Sudanic region as a gold colony, a trans-Saharan answer to Spain's American conquest. His victory revealed to him that this was a mirage and he died of plague a few years after the fall of Songhay. Within two decades, the Moroccan state had completely lost its grip on the region. The Middle Niger security vacuum re-emerged and lasted until the arrival of the French, despite the formation of a few power centres, including as we have seen the Torobe *jihad* state of Hamdallaye in the Macina. From a *longue durée* perspective, today's events thus seem like a return of the post-Songhay security vacuum, especially since the failure of economic development means that the social and economic structures that were forged in its crucible

had not changed very much. But if this state of affairs arose from a fortuitous convergence of events—the exile of battle-hardened Salafi militants to the Sahel, a Tuareg insurgency, a NATO intervention—it has become entrenched, less fortuitously, in the periphery of the periphery, the Sahel's agro-pastoral backwaters, and amongst the most peripheral people in that realm, the Fulani herders.

Fulani pastoralism has been declining for decades across the great arc that stretches from Senegal to the Central African Republic, for reasons discussed above. The crisis is compounded by global warming, which intensifies competition not just over land, but also over water, in many places forcing Fulani herders to try to convert to farming.[29] In the scheme of the traditional Sudanic economy, where ethnic communities—or some subset thereof—are also economic sectors, the decay, and, in some places, destruction of pastoralism has all the social consequences of an unregulated industrial crisis, including predation on the weakest, rampant joblessness, psychological trauma, violent crime and murderous turf battles.

These factors could be found all along the arc of crisis, with the Fulani everywhere as main actors, although in different roles according to the terrain. In central Mali and northern Burkina, Fulani herders were exposed to abuses and predation from elite groups, both Fulani and non-Fulani; in the Liptako-Gourma (Burkina–Niger border), many turned to violent crime, in the forms of highway robbery or mundane burglary and armed theft; and the Mali–Niger border was a scene of turf wars with Tuareg pastoralists and Songhay-Zarma farmers.

The Fulani problem could not find a comprehensive solution in the non-political style of government that prevails in the periphery, especially since the turn to electoral politics in the 1990s was attended by a neoliberal thinning of the state. Electoralism, which increased and multiplied demands on the political system, was ushered in precisely when government was being radically retrenched by structural-adjustment programmes. For the despairing in the post-Songhay zone, democracy

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[29] See the new documentary *Marcher sur l'eau* (November 2021), shot in northern Niger in 2018–20 among a community of Fulani herders by the French-Sahelian actress Aïssa Maïga, which forcefully connects the local crisis with the global issue of climate change while also emphasizing the strength and gumption of the community.

could not be the solution, and the future looked bleak. And then, militant Salafism brought hope, especially since war against the shoddy armies of the Sahel seemed so easy.

A Salafist periphery

Salafism has been present in non-violent forms in the Sahel since the 1940s, and the 1990s democratization had freed it from police-state fetters.[30] But it was not very adept at spreading out of urban areas and into the countryside. Its cultivation of a bookish, Arabophone and Arabophile Islam does not suit rural lifestyles very well—in somewhat the same manner that Westernized urban ways also meet with little success there. Covering women in heavy veils is damaging to farm work and proscribing any local rite or usage that contravenes a peculiar canonical theology seems a sure way to start *fitna*, violent division among people who, though Muslims, had remained close to their old Sudanic culture. Islam as social criticism was always alive in the countryside, but it was a way of using religion to safely 'speak truth to power', not a political project of becoming oneself that power, in the name of God—which is the Salafi vision. Islamic social criticism was perhaps especially vigorous among the Fulani, whose clerical-minded people could easily imbibe the Torobe tradition that is a rich source of the practice. Hamadun Kufa, the leader of the Fulani *jihadis* in the Macina region, and the late Ibrahim Dicko of Burkina, both began their careers as successful preachers in that vein, before they moved toward Salafism, which favours political revolution and moral formatting—the righteous life—but has little time for social reform.

The 2013 Mali War offered the opportunity for starting a Salafi revolution in that country, a power grab for Iyad ag-Ghali, the Tuareg Salafi leader, and a shortcut to social justice—in the framework of Islam—for the Macina leader, Hamadun Kufa. Operation Serval almost killed the opportunity, but Barkhane's errors have revived it. In launching that operation, as we have seen, Paris initially chose to side with the Tuareg rebels, a blunder on the proportions of a 'defeat of the mind', to quote from Duclert's Rwanda report. French support for previous Tuareg rebellions—expressed in an unvaryingly pro-rebel media coverage, broadcast to a Francophone region—had left Sahelian public opinion with no

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[30] The argument here draws from Idrissa, *The Politics of Islam in the Sahel*, where a wider range of countries is discussed.

shadow of a doubt that France would gladly break Niger and Mali up to create a puppet Tuareg state in their northern desert at the first opportunity. Operation Barkhane's interventions seemed a striking confirmation of that conviction, and they especially panicked the Fulani of the Niger–Mali border who had been fighting Tuareg pastoralists since the times of the 1990s rebellion. They joined the ranks of the *jihadis* in droves, the first population to give to Salafism the numerical heft it had lacked. This, in turn, worked as a pull for other Fulani groups in the post-Songhay region, especially in Macina, the home of Kufa.

In the late 2010s, under the impact of Barkhane, the northern Mali *jihadis* regrouped into more cohesive and efficient bodies. One form this took was 'affiliation' to the major (metropolitan) Middle Eastern jihadist organisations, Al Qaeda and ISIS, in a process that has yielded the current Al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM (Arabic acronym for 'Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims') and the ISIS-linked ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara). The leadership of these organizations is Arab-Berber (North African and Tuareg), but most of the footsoldiers are Fulani. Their social grievances and the habitus of violence developed in bandit groups or communal militias, associated with the Torobe heritage of fostering militancy through religion, made of them the ideal population for the spread of *jihad* in the post-Songhay region. This may also very well explain the stability of the conflict zone: although there are Fulani populations in other parts of the Sahel, and in fact, in other regions of Niger and Burkina, their history is different and they have not been mobilized by JNIM or ISGS.

Fulani *jihadism* in the Sahel is thus not so much 'ethnic' (as per Lugan) as peripheral, somewhat analogous to French or European *jihadism* in fact. In a similar way, it is not much apprized of the Salafi canon, a highly bookish affair, nor of classical Arabic, and it is rife with gauche or grisly mimicry, with an insistence on form and symbols. The stories that circulate today in the tri-border area, sometimes with video evidence, speak of senseless beating, forms of torture—men found with cigarettes face the practice of lighting all of them and putting them out one by one on their skin—high-stakes robbery, as a way of filling the war chest, and beheadings. Young motorbike-riding, gun-toting Fulani men capture travellers and force them to sit through unhinged homilies. They demand of men that they grow a certain type of beard and wear pants that stop above the ankle, vowing punishment if that has not happened at a next encounter.

The cattle rustling which the majority-Fulani bandit groups of Nigeria's Zamfara state practice as avowed brigandage also occurs in this context, but is labelled a fiscal levy. And killing, to them, comes easily, because they are God-pleasing crusaders. In the Nigerien district of Torodi—the name derives from the Torobe—which borders eastern Burkina, Fulani *jihad* militants have recently circulated a message on how they must be identified: Marabouts—doubtless in the original military meaning of the word—not bandits.

5. REHABILITATION OF THE STATE?

'The only good that Barkhane did,' a French general has remarked, 'was to end Épervier.'[31] The reference was to the seemingly interminable military intervention that began in Chad in the 1980s, morphing out of an operation against Gadhafi, and was finally merged into Barkhane in 2014. The affirmation had two meanings: as a relic of France's old bad ways in Africa, Épervier deserved to die; and Barkhane was no good because it made too many mistakes. That this should be said by a high-ranking military officer—relatively young—was probably a sign of the times. French military interventions have been endemic to Africa. But Operation Barkhane, though far more harshly judged than all others in Sahelian public opinion—indeed stoking the first popular anti-French sovereigntist movement in the region—may belong to a new chapter.

Given the long-drawn-out history of operations that easily fall under the neo-colonial scheme known as 'Françafrique', critics of France's African policy may be forgiven for thinking that the Sahel operations are only the latest episode in that shocking series. Yet the interests defended and the approaches adopted differ from those of the typical Françafrique operation. The goal is not to eliminate an inconvenient leader or shelter a yes-man. The West appears to need a strong local military, not a weak one. Noise from the past—France enthroning the late dictator's son in Chad last April, for example—drowns the sound of change and old instincts linger on.[32] But there is evidence of a new state of mind, if perhaps forced by the events. Winding down Barkhane means the intervention is going to be less expansive and expensive; more targeted

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[31] Interview with the author near the École Militaire in Paris, September 2021.
[32] Idrissa, 'The End of Déby', NLR–Sidecar, 29 April 2021.

and tactically operative: the US policy of taking out the leaders—the phrase 'scalp hunt' is heard in military circles—and getting national state services into abandoned districts. And this last theme, now regularly brought up by Macron in an accent of impatience, is decidedly not Françafrique.

Despite the riling tone and language, this gets close to one of the root issues in the Sahel, which is extreme government scarcity, even if Paris may not have a real understanding of the implications. In the 1970s, a time of tribulation for the development project, the Western discourse on the state in Africa hardened into disdain and cynicism as the perceptive literature on political development in the South—which produced such clear-eyed imperial masterworks as Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*—was abandoned. Africanist political scientists became exclusively interested in theories of why the state in Africa does not work, or 'works' only through corruption and disorder. The classics of the subfield, as it constituted itself, have titles that speak for themselves: *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* or *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly*. Another classic, Jeffrey Herbst's *States and Power in Africa*, is premised on the notion that overall, the state does not work in Africa, and barely exists in the Sahel in particular.[33] These views do not stay buried in the university; they carry through to the world of expertise on 'development'—or, in the Sahel these days, 'security'—where the state nearly always appears as both a nuisance to placate and a nonentity to skirt.

The paradoxical conclusion, though one in line with the logic of peripheralization, is not about how to strengthen the state, but how to further debilitate it. Neoliberal state restructuring has accomplished much in that direction since the 1990s. The era also saw the rise of a donors' obsession for decentralization, which illustrates the paradox very well: the state is non-existent, and so must be decentralized. It is hard to imagine how that which barely exists could be distributed. But the subtext, here, is often that Africa has no nations, only conglomerates of ethnic groups—the word 'tribe' surfaces easily, if not in writing, at least in speech—and there lurks in the project a recipe for the 'retribalization'

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[33] Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Bloomington IN 1999; Jean-François Bayart, *The Politics of the Belly: The State in Africa*, Oxford 2009 [1989]; Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Princeton 2000.

of Africa. The *Weltanschauung* behind this explains, for example, the French pro-rebel, or, as they saw it, pro-Tuareg proclivities.

Yet a functioning state in principle might work better for the disadvantaged than for the wealthy and elites who, in Africa as elsewhere, are more interested in a small, pliable state that does not get in the way of their vast private interests. (Western analysts, of course, are used to describing the puny states in Africa as 'bloated'). The universal complaint in the Sahel countryside—one that was most pressing among older Fulani herders, in the late 2010s—was not about lack of decentralization, but about the absence of the state.[34] If the complaint feeds into the trope of the 'weak', 'failed', or 'limited' state, what rural dwellers grieve is not the nature of the state, but the lack of enforcement of impartial rules and spread of useful services, which are the labour of the state—and, importantly, are not aid. But even when such appeals are recorded, the usual tenor of experts' reports and studies is inevitably about supporting decentralization and 'informal governance', an insinuation of tribal self-government. Much Western aid money for 'governance' in the Sahel flows in that direction.

Blowback

With the flop and blowback of the Tuareg Kidal strategy, the realization of the need for functional national states and territorial government in the Sahel is beginning to dawn in Paris—which, now, wants it to happen at once, as if the history of abetted decline described above does not exist. Macron's calculated expressions of impatience reveal some of the underlying issues besetting the Sahelian states, and the nature of their sovereign relations with France or the West. For example, in a *faux* diplomatically incorrect outburst earlier this year, Macron told—on the record—journalists Antoine Glaser and Pascal Airault that Burkina's president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré 'feared' his army, had 'devitalized' it and preferred long-lasting outside military help to reform defence.[35]

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[34] Decentralization in Niger and Mali began in the mid-1990s as a way of meeting halfway the demands of Tuareg rebels who, short of secession, wanted ethnic federalism. But decentralization did introduce an element of democratization in the rural areas, a fact made notable in Niger for example by the capture of municipalities in Tuareg areas by the Ikelan (former slave) majorities.

[35] Antoine Glaser and Pascal Airault, *Le Piège africain de Macron: Du continent à l'Hexagone*, Paris 2021.

Fear of a coup is certainly one hurdle to an overhaul of the armed forces in the Sahel, but if Macron chose to come down on Kaboré, rather than on the Nigerien president Issoufou—who seems to have done much more in the way of devitalization of his army[36]—this was also because the Burkinabe government is less cooperative with French plans than the Nigerien. Niger is the West's steadfast ally in the Sahel—in 2017 it criminalized migrant transport, at the EU's behest—while Burkina after the fall of Compaoré is only an ally of necessity, and Mali, a messy partner at best. For the post-Barkhane phase of their intervention, it is in Niamey that the French are regrouping their forces.[37]

Still, this new emphasis on the reform of the *État régalien*—the 'hardcore' state of defence, security, justice, and administration—is part of what the end of Barkhane means. A gradual French change of heart is leading to one of those tragedies of errors which result from a terrible history. In the end, France's intervention in the Sahel, codenamed or not, is perhaps an early manifestation—not yet admitted as such in Paris—of the end of the policy of grandeur. But because of the country's past mischief, initial gaffes and apparent inability to defeat what look like gangs of gun-toting herders, it is widely interpreted across the Sahel—though not necessarily in the zone of intervention itself—as nurturing the worst intentions, recolonization by way of *jihad.* Macron's very public announcement of the end of Barkhane is, in part, a tactic to cool public-opinion temperatures in the Sahel.

All the same: 'We are not leaving the Sahel, and we will not leave Mali', the general at the École Militaire told me, adding after a beat, 'unless they tell us to'. The 'desired end state', to use military terminology, is to impair *jihadi* forces to the extent that local militaries would be able to 'handle' them in the long run, and the Franco-Europeans could pull

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[36] There was a conviction in Issoufou's entourage of the need for an ethnic purge of the military, seen as a Songhay-Zarma bastion, and this was carried out to protect him against a potential ethnically motivated coup. Issoufou, who left power in early 2021, also presided over a vast system of graft and war profiteering which was exposed by a state audit in February 2020.

[37] Niger is where the US have their largest base in the region. Western lobbying was key in Issoufou being awarded the Mo Ibrahim Prize for excellence in African leadership in 2021 despite his unpopularity in Niger.

out in a seemlier way than the Americans did in Afghanistan.[38] There is some appearance of success in the fact that the *jihadis* are now eschewing the kind of frontal attacks on the local military which they led in past years with great success. But they have turned to mass terrorism against local civilian populations, attempting to force them to obey their decrees in the manner of a clandestine state. This outcome requires intensive brutality and plays on the inability of the state—any state, really—to supply security everywhere, at all times, especially against a shadowy enemy. In response, local communities are arming themselves for self-protection and a new phase of violence is in the offing. The desired end state is thus out of sight, and given the enormous relevance of the Sahel to Europe's sense of security and safety, so is the end of the Franco-European intervention.

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[38] This vision does not however follow from the Afghanistan debacle. A French National Assembly report on the end of Barkhane had already detailed it in April this year, after collecting information long established.